

# ISLAM, ADAT, AND THE STATE: Matrifocality in Aceh Revisited

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## Abstract

*Matrifocality has been a rooted tradition in the social history of the community in Aceh. The principles of matrifocality have also affected on how women are positioned in the community, and the socio-gender relation within the community. The fact that Aceh has strongly associated to the Islamic values that claimed to support the paternal traditions. Apparently, the Islamic values and the local matrifocality practices juxtaposed through the roles of adat, which considered as inseparable to Islamic law or teaching, or in local term known as *zat ngeun sifeut*. Another point in revisiting matrifocality in Aceh is an examination of how gender state ideology, particularly during the New Order Regime disregarded some local gender practices across some ethnics in the archipelago. Meanwhile, the state also hegemonied and promoted particular gender state ideology such as state *ibuism*. Nonetheless, the modernity and social changes have also contributed to the shifting of some matrifocality practices in contemporary Acebnese society. However, since the matrifocality has a strong root in the social life of the community, the principles of the matrifocality still survived until currently, although it transformed into 'new matrifocality' practices.*

**Keywords:** matrifocality, Aceh, gender, *shari'a* law

## A. Introduction

Aceh and some other ethnics in Indonesia like Minangkabau and Java have been known as matrifocal society, yet these areas are also as the stronghold of Islam. The Islamic values have been understood to prefer paternity as a social institution, and set up several norms to support the paternal values. Within the community like Aceh, Islam and matrifocality juxtaposed, although some scholars emphasized the incompatibility of the two social systems, yet in the eye of the Acehnese community and in their daily practices Islamic and matrifocality traditions are not 'contradictory'. In 2002, Islamic values have been [re]introduced again in the formalisation of *shari'a* law, and the public expression on Islam and Islamic values grew greater since then. This policy did influenced in the life of women in Aceh, but how far it affects the practices of matrifocality is still unclear. The social changes in modern and contemporary Aceh society have also been believed to deconstruct the practices of matrifocality. This article intends to revisit the existing matrifocality practices in Aceh community and examine the intersection of the Islamic values, adat and gender state ideology or policy that shape or even change the matrifocal practices of the Acehnese community.

In the oldest manuscripts of Acehnese history of *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai*, the legend of Aceh started from the story of Putro Beutong (Bamboo Princess), when Raja Ahmad found a girl hiding behind the *beutong* (bamboo), and adopted her as his daughter. He then also adopted a son and named him Meurah Gajah who then married to Putro Beutong. The couple became the ancestor of the first [Muslim] king of Aceh from Pasai kingdom. The earlier traveller's notes also recorded Aceh's adoption to Islam at least since the thirteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The connections of Aceh with the merchants from Middle East and Gujarat since the seventh and ninth century had introduced the local people of Sumatra to this new religion. For Aceh since then, all of the emerging kingdoms were closely associated to Islam. After Perlak and Samudera, Lamri, the well known of Aceh Darussalam kingdom emerged in 1514. Sultan Ali Mughayat Shah was the first king to rule the kingdom from 1514 – 1530. All of rulers in Aceh labelled with the Arabic name of *malik* or *sultan*,

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<sup>1</sup> John Davis, *The Voyages and Work of John Davis*, ed., intro. and Annot. by Albert Hastings (Markam, New York: Burt Franklin, 1970).

the title used in other Muslim world. The *sultan* of Aceh Darussalam kingdom had a religious advisor called “*qadhi malikul adil*” similar to the position of grand *mufti* in some Muslim countries or kingdom. *Qadhi Malikul Adil* was an *ulama* of their time who was always chosen among the most learned, productive and celebrated figures such as Abdurra’uf al-Singkily or Nuruddin Ar-raniry.

The existing history of Aceh almost always suggest its close adherence to Islam, while the history of Aceh before the penetration of Islam was not known much and was not written extensively. Some cultural practices in Aceh society suggest its connection to the Hinduism,<sup>2</sup> such as in the *peusijek*<sup>3</sup> tradition. The people in Aceh are aware that *peusijek* derived from Hinduism tradition and was similar to what is practiced in India, but still for them, this practice has been perceived as ‘islamized’ with the recitation of *do’a* (prayers), *shalawat* while doing this *peusijek*. There only very few people in Aceh who resist and consider the *peusijek* as un-Islamic. However like Minangkabau, Aceh society believed that Islam is the core entity of its culture, and cannot be separated from the life of the community. The most popular local wisdom in this regards is “*hukom ngeun adat lagee z’at ngeun sife’*”. This is almost similar to what is known in Minangkabau as “*adat basandi syara’, syara’ basandi kitabullah*”. Generally it means that Islam and *adat* are inseparable, and indeed acceptance of *adat* is considered as part of local religious tradition.

Islam has been part of the development of culture, oral tradition and the classical scholarship of *ulama* in Aceh society, and has also proved to be politically influential as well, particularly through the roles of *ulama* or local religious leader.<sup>4</sup> In this area, the Darul Islam and Tentara Islam

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<sup>2</sup> C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Atjehnese* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1906).

<sup>3</sup> *Peusijek* is a popularly practices for the sake of blessing in almost all of *adat* ceremonies such as marriage, new born baby celebration. The water and rice with some leaves are used for the *peusijek*. The people who will do the *peusijek* are those of religious leaders of close family member. The *peusijek* ceremony sometimes is closed with the recitation of prayer.

<sup>4</sup> Alfian (ed.), *Segi-segi Sosial Budaya Masyarakat Aceh* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1977); James T. Siegel, *The Rope of God*, Barkely (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969); Stuart A. Schlegel, “Technocrats in a Muslim Society: Symbolic Communities in Aceh”, in Gloria Davis (ed), *What is Modern Indonesian Culture* (Ohio: Centre for International Studies South Asia series, 1979), p. 232 – 248.

Indonesia (DI/TII) movement rebelled to the Indonesian Republic to aspire for an Islamic country of Aceh. After DI/TII, another armed political movement of Aceh Merdeka was declared in early 1970s by Hasan Tiro, who used to be part of DI/TII movement with Tgk. Daud Beureu'euh.<sup>5</sup> Since then in some areas of the Northern and Eastern parts of Aceh, the so called "*konflik Aceh*" began, and went beyond other areas of the Southern and Western coast of Aceh as well as in the mainland of Gayo highland after the Reformasi Order in 1998. Prior to Helsinki MoU in 2005, there was no region in Aceh which was not affected by this armed conflict. The central government of Jakarta considered the aspiration for *shari'a* law as one of background behind the struggle for Aceh independence, then offered the idea of formalisation of *shari'a* law in the framework of Aceh regional autonomy.

The Islamic kingdoms in Aceh recorded the reign of several female rulers, the most well-known ones was the four successive queens of Aceh Darussalam kingdom,<sup>6</sup> although the previous Islamic kingdom of Perlak and Samudera Pasai also had female rulers such as Queen Nahrasiyah and Nuru Illa. Although in the discourse of Islamic jurisprudence the issue of women's leadership is debatable. Referring to this fact Mernissi (1993) in her book on *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* mentioned that Islamic societies in Indonesia, particularly Aceh, tend to be unusual in terms of political power of women when compared to Middle Eastern or other Muslim societies. Aceh also had a powerful female admiral, Laksamana Malahayati and her women's troops to defend the coastal Aceh territory. Besides Sultan Iskandar Muda, the ruler of Aceh Darussalam kingdom in the seventeenth century had formed royal elite women guards, namely Divisi Keumala Cahya.<sup>7</sup> Some female heroin also appeared in the histroy of Aceh such as Cut Nyak Dhien, Cut Nyak Meutia, Po Cut Baren,

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<sup>5</sup> M. Isa. Sulaiman, *Sejarah Aceh: Sebuah Gugatan terhadap Tradisi* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Y. Andaya, "A very good natired but awe-inspiring government" the reign of a successful queen in seventeenth-century Aceh", in Elsbeth Locher-Scholten and Peter Rietbergen (eds), *Hof En Handel: Aziatische vorsten en de VOC 1620 – 1720* (2004), p. 59 – 84.

<sup>7</sup> Amirul Hadi, *Islam and State in Sumatra A Study of Seventeen-Century Aceh* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2004).

Teungku Fakinah and some others.<sup>8</sup> Those women were not only well known for their physical confrontation in several battles, but some of them were also well known for their skills in literary works such as Po Cut Baren, and in educational field such as Teungku Fakinah who had a *dayah* and was a leader of the *dayah* and led her troops from the *dayah*.

Women and power in the history of Aceh might suggest its connection to the matrifocality principles of the Aceh community. What is interesting then, the matrifocal tradition of Aceh, Minangkabau or Negeri Sembilan from Malay Peninsula is the fact that this matrifocality juxtaposed with the strong local Islamic values. In her book, *Beyond the Veil*, Mernissi argued that Islam has transferred the matrilineal of Arabic communities into the trend of patrilineal that emphasized that physical paternity, women's dependency and virilocal dwelling traditions.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the power and control over the household, property, and land belong to the male dominance. In her work, Mernissi also portrayed women's subordination to Islamic patriarchy by referring to some Middle Eastern context, particularly Morocco, in which the public and domestic were dichotomised spheres. The public – domestic dichotomy has been referred as a source of subordination.<sup>10</sup> Mernissi's account on particular context of Middle Eastern societies cannot be generalised for the whole portrait of Muslim women all around the world. According to Blackwood, "Rural Southeast Asia provide important forum for rethinking gender and power because of prevalence of women's landholding, control of finance, and control of agricultural resources."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ainal Mardhiah Aly, "Pergerakan Wanita di Aceh Masa Lampau Sampai Kini" in Ismail Suny (ed), *Bunga Rampai tentang Aceh* (Jakarta: Penerbit Bhratara Karya Aksara, 1980), p. 282 – 317.

<sup>9</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male and Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1975), p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Tanner, "Matrifocality in Indonesia and Africa and among Black America", in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 129 – 156.

<sup>11</sup> Evelyn Blackwood, *Webs of Power: Women, Kin, and Community in a Sumatran Village* (New York etc: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Inc, 2000), p. 8.

Aspects of matrifocality in Aceh have not been [re]researched after Hurgronje (1906), Siegel (1969) and Jayawardena (1977).<sup>12</sup> Although these have been significant academic references, however those works were based on the situation in Aceh in the past hundred or decades ago. The current socio-cultural context might not represent the previous account of matrifocal practices. How far the practice has changed, and how it copes with modernity and the state paternal policies has never been uncovered so far. This article aims at examining the intersection of Islam, *adat* and the state policy and ideology and how these factors contribute to shaping and changing the matrifocality in Aceh.

## **B. Matrifocality in Aceh: Background and Practice**

In defining matrifocality, Tanner believed that matrifocality is not only “mother focused”, but also implies “two constructs: (1) kinship systems in which (a) the role of mother is structurally, culturally, and affectively central and (b) this multidimensional centrality is legitimate; and (2) the societies in which these feature coexist, where (a) the relationship between the sexes is relatively egalitarian and (b) both women and men are important actors in the economic sectors.”<sup>13</sup> Whereas Smith, in his work on *The Matrifocal Family*, referred to the matrifocal as “matri-central”, “matriarchal”, “female dominated”, “grandmother family”, and so on. He particularly argues that “it is women who in their roles as mothers who come to be the focus of relationships, rather the head of the household as such.”<sup>14</sup> However, although the focus of what Tanner and Smith utilized in defining matrifocality is slightly different, but both of them still emphasize on relative women’s power, particularly within the household and in certain public domain. The core meaning of matrifocality is dissimilar to the concept female-headed household (*perempuan kepala keluarga*) as the development concept of the state referred. In the state policy, the head of the household (*kepala*

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<sup>12</sup> Jayawardena, “Women and Kinship in Aceh Besar, Northern Sumatra,” *Ethnology*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Jan, 1977), p. 21-38; James T. Siegel, *The Rope of God*; C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Atjehnese*.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Tanner, “Matrifocality in Indonesia”.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond T. Smith, *The Matrifocal Family: Power, Pluralism and Politics* (New York and London: New York, 1996).

*keluarga*) is almost always understood as man, only in specific cases of widowed family, a woman is considered as the head of the household. The matrifocality does not refer to specific cases like this, the relative power of women could be attained with or without their husbands or other male clans' presence.

Matrifocality in Aceh is mentioned in a number of scholarly works,<sup>15</sup> together with some matrifocal societies in Indo-Malay world like Minangkabau and Negeri Sembilan. Nevertheless, there has been little accounts found on the origin of this matrifocality traditions in Indo-Malay world and their connection from one to another. Although it has been some speculations for instance the matrifocality in Minangkabau might come from Aceh as Smith mentioned in his book on culture of Aceh:

During the mid late 1600s, the stresses of warfare, rival traders, and internal uprisings caused the influence of Aceh to decline. This in turn enabled the *uleebalang*, or male district leaders, to gather and command more power at the local level, and during their rise they used their influence not only to displace the queen but also to greatly restrict the authority of women in Aceh. Perhaps out of frustration, it was at this time that a group of local female leaders left the province to move south and form Sumatra's matriarchal Minangkabau culture"<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, Govindan Unny's work on *Kinship Systems in South and Southeast Asia* argued that the matrifocality traditions in Sumatra of Minangkabau originated from Indian.<sup>17</sup> Seemingly, this might be also the case of matrifocality in Aceh, as remnants of Hinduism can still be found in Aceh, and *orang keeling* referred to those of sub-Indian continent ethnic have been among social groups in Aceh.<sup>18</sup> Although, the matrifocality of Minangkabau and Aceh might refer to the similar

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<sup>15</sup> C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Atjehnese*; James T. Siegel, *The Rope of God*; Evelyn Blackwood, *Webs of Power*; Michael G. Peletz, *Reason and Passion: Representation of Gender in a Malay Society* (Berkeley etc: University of California Press, 1996); Nancy Tanner, "Matrifocality in Indonesia".

<sup>16</sup> Holly S. Smith, *Aceh: Art and Culture* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Govindan Unny, *Kinship Systems in South and Southeast Asia: A Study* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House PVT LTD, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Atjehnese*.



origin, in practice, the two matrifocality system are not precise in character, for instance Aceh does not have the concept of “*rumah gadang*,” a big house in which an elder woman has dominant power to her family and clan;<sup>19</sup> besides there is no the imaginary figure of *Bundo Kanduang* in Aceh matrifocal traditions, or in the inheritance practices that goes to maternal line. Yet, there are also some similarities; between Aceh and Minangkabau; boys has no room in their family house, they spent their night in the nearby *surau* or *meunasah* in Aceh.<sup>20</sup>

For the community of Aceh, *meunasah* is similar to *surau* in Minangkabau, West Sumatra; it is the place for prayer and for other common gathering. *Meunasah* has been central public space for men of the given community. *Meunasah* has also been a significant institution of learning in the history of Islamic education in Aceh.<sup>21</sup> There is a *meunassah* in every village where men gather to pray, rest, and associate with one another in the afternoons and after the *isjbar* prayer at nights. The affairs of the *meunassah* are organized by the *teungku meunassah*, a man regarded as being versed in the religious scriptures and who acts as an *imam* (leader) in prayer.<sup>22</sup> Since the introduction of *shari’a* law in Aceh, the function of *meunasah* is revitalized with diverse socio-religious activities. Today, more women come to *meunasah*, some of women’s *majelis taklims* take place in a *meunasah*.

Some earlier ethnographical works on Aceh has indicated women’s relative power within the household. Based on his research in Pidie during 1960s, Siegel came up with the idea of “marginalization of men” within

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<sup>19</sup> Evelyn Blackwood, *Webs of Power*; , Joke van Renen, “The Salty Mouth of a Senior Woman: Gender and The House in Minangkabau” in Juliette Kuning *et al*, *Women and Household in Indonesia: Cultural Notions and Social Practices* (Richmond Surrey: Curzon, 2000) p. 163 – 179; Nancy Tanner, “Matrifocality in Indonesia”.

<sup>20</sup> Taufik Abdullah, *Schools and Politics: The Kaum Muda Movement in West Sumatra (1927 – 1933)* (Ithaca New York: Cornell Indonesian Modern Asia Program, 1971); Azyumardi Azra, *Surau: Pendidikan Islam Tradisional dalam Transisi dan Modernisasi* (Jakarta: Logos, 2003); Baihaqi, *Ulama dan Madrasah di Aceh* (Jakarta: Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia bekerja sama dengan Departemen Agama, 1976).

<sup>21</sup> Baihaqi, *Ulama dan Madrasah di Aceh*.

<sup>22</sup> Jayawardena, *Women and Kinship in Aceh Besar*, p. 32.



the social family structure of Aceh community,<sup>23</sup> as Hurgronje has also already mentioned earlier in his work *The Atjehnese*.

Atjehnese children are born in the house of their mother. The idiomatic expression for wife is, in fact, “the one owns the house” (*njang po rumah*). Women acquire a house, or at least a portion of one, at the time of their marriage. The house is a gift from the woman’s parents....Girls grow up in their mother’s house and remain there or nearby for the rest of their lives. Parents build a new house for themselves and the rest of their family when their first daughters marries....A typical village consist of clusters of houses owned by sisters and aunts (mother’s sister), with the compounds often sharing a well and a fence.<sup>24</sup>

Women also have been active in the management of the household. Most of the responsibilities related to children education are carried out by women,<sup>25</sup> while men as fathers used to have less interaction with their children.<sup>26</sup> This indeed has strengthened the matrifocal relation of the family even more. In the divorce case, the custody or the guardianship traditionally and culturally falls into women (mothers) or children’s maternal families.

### 1. *Marriage and Marital Life*

The main arrangement of marriage of community in Aceh is relied on the Islamic injunctions, particularly in the aspects related to the main requirements for the validity of Islamic marriage. One of the requirements for the marriage contracts in Islamic jurisprudence text books is the dowry. In Islam, a man has to pay a dowry for her future wife. In some parts of Minangkabau society, such as Pariaman, the matrifocality also influences the concept of dowry payment. It is women or her family who should pay the dowry for her future husband.<sup>27</sup> The

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<sup>23</sup> James T. Siegel, *The Rope of God*, p. 138; C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Atjehnese*, p. 339.

<sup>24</sup> James T. Siegel, *The Rope of God*, p. 52.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Teuku Sjamsuddin, “Kebudayaan Aceh,” in Koentjaraningrat, *Manusia dan Kebudayaan di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Djambatan, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., 1987).

<sup>27</sup> Evelyn Blackwood, *Webs of Power: Women, Kin, and Community in a Sumatran Village* (New York etc: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Inc, 2000).

matrifocality in Aceh did not affect the method of dowry payment. Traditionally, after the wedding, it was the wife's parents who supported the new couple life. had they are not independent yet in earning income to support the new family.

Dowry in Indonesian language is called "*mas kawin*" and in Acehnese language called "*jeuname*." *Jeuname*, as one of marriage requirements, is always provided by a groom, not by a bride or her parent. Within Muslim community in Indonesia, dowry takes different form, ranging from more concrete economic things until the symbolic ones. In modern and urban settings on community in Jakarta and also in Java, "*seperangkat alat sholat*" (sholat stuffs) or al-Qur'an were given by groom as dowry. In Aceh community, it is always in the concrete form, not symbolic ones. During the colonial period, *jeuname* was in the form of Dutch guilders. Due to the instability of money values for inflation, etc, the dowry is currently in a form of gold,<sup>28</sup> mostly [golden] jewellery, and not other kind of jewellery like silver, pearl, and as such, since it's economic cost or conversion is not stable.<sup>29</sup>

In numerous books on Islamic jurisprudence, the concept of *nafkah* (maintenance/allowance) is always mentioned as the main and sole responsibility of the husband, a wife is exempted from supporting family financially. This concept, in reality does not affect the polarization of works among men and women of Aceh like in other parts of the Indonesian archipelago. Women are also involved in economic activities and production, particularly related to the land cultivation. Based on his research in Aceh Besar in the region, Jayawardena describes the

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<sup>28</sup> Yunus Amir Hamzah, Hasil Survey tentang Kedudukan Wanita dan Keluarga Berencana" in Ismail Suny (ed), *Bunga Rampai tentang Aceh* (Jakarta: Penerbit Bhratara Karya Aksara, 1980), p. 429.

<sup>29</sup> The values of dowry is also reflected the social status of the bride's family. It was the bride family who decided what kind of dowry they would require from a groom and his family. Previously the highest dowry payment was 100 guilders. Some of the bride family would only require 50 guilder or even less than that. Afterwards, the dowry has been changed in the form of gold of jewelry. The highest dowry payment then is 100 *mayam* (1 *mayam* is 3,3 gram). The gold has been chosed as it has more stable value and can be convrted easily into cash had one has an urgent cash supply. In some areas in Aceh, a higher dowry value is still applied such as in Pidie community. This has been claimed related to the practice of matrifocality as the parent of the bride will also prepare the house or property for newly wed couple. See *Ibid.*, p. 430

polarisation of economic activities between men and women is reflected within the concept of men as *mita peng* (seek for money) and women as *mita breuh* (see for rice).<sup>30</sup> Women in Aceh Besar are very active in land cultivation. They go to the rice field with or without their husband. Whereas in some other areas like in Aceh Barat, not all of women involved in land cultivation directly, nevertheless they still have control over the land, particularly if other farmers rent and cultivate the land on the profit-shared basis. In some parts of Aceh the polarization of men seek for money and women seek for rice is not relevant anymore as Aceh has transferred from traditional agricultural society to growing industrial society. In contemporary Aceh, women enter professional workforces such as working in government offices, particularly those from middle upper class, and those with well-educated background.

Upon marriage, a groom will stay with women's family; the uxori-locality is quite common within matrilocality families. Within the uxori-local dwelling, men are exempted for supporting the daily family meals, as long as they live with the wife's parent. It was the responsibility of wife's parents to provide so. Here, the concept of *nafkah* that commonly understood as the main responsibility of husband is not practiced. On the other hand, it even also strengthens the matrilocality as the children grew up with the support of her mother's family. For newlywed couple, they live with the parent, until they are relatively independent. Within the house, it might be other nuclear family from the women's side. Although they live in the same house, usually mother-in-laws always avoids interacting with their sons-in-laws. In earlier community until 1980, mother-in-law seldom has any interaction or personal communication or conversation with their son-in-law. In extreme ways, they will always avoid to be in the same space (within the home) with son-in-laws, because of "*sungkan*" or "*malu*". Although currently the relation between a woman and her son-in-law in Aceh is quite flexible, however the principles of *sungkan* and *malu* still limit their interaction.

In Aceh, a house has a strong connection to women, until currently, parent always inherited house to their daughters and it is in a very rare situation the house will be inherited to their sons. Moreover, for well-to-do families in the region like Pidie, parents already prepared the house

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<sup>30</sup> Jayawardena, Women and Kinship in Aceh Besar.

to be provided for their daughters, and the dowry, a husband would pay for his future wife is higher compared to other areas in Aceh. Wives in local Acehnese language is “*njang po rumoh*”<sup>31</sup> means the one who owns the house, this will also rest power over women had the house is belong to her. In a case a husband and a wife they have to separate temporarily, the husband will leave the house, and occasionally [in traditional] Aceh society, he would stay in *meunasah*. Moreover, in the case of divorce, the inherited house is still the property of women, and it is not part of *barta bersama* (shared property) between husband and wife. For inheritance, the family usually would have a consultation on the inheritance process with local religious leaders (*teungku*) beforehand. The common Islamic jurisprudence principle is applied as women received half than that of men; 2:1. Nevertheless, this share is not included the *hibah*, like the house or the land given to the daughter. All in all, women did not receive less than her male siblings, in some situations, she might get even more.

## 2. *Islam and Matrifocality*

When discussed Islam and Matrifocality, Dubee cited that Islam is: “...born and shaped in a patrilineal setting and subsequently spread to similarly organized communities in the period of its development and crystallization...” Whatever has been said in the Islamic holy books and legal text about the family, particularly the duties and obligations of parents, children, and spouses; about the implications of marriage, particularly rules enjoining the husband to properly maintain the household, wife, and children; about not driving away a wife from her house (except for adultery); about the guardianship of the children in the event of the remarriage of the mother; about the laws of inheritance and guardianship of property for minor children indicate a patrilineal set up”<sup>32</sup>

Along the history, Islamic values adopted by Aceh community did not limit the mobility of women in public space or to have power within the household. Islam in Aceh as in other Indo-Malay society did not take the form of segregation of women even within the higher rank of family. Although the traditional house of women has a space of *seuramo inong* (women hall) and *seuramo agam* (men hall), it is more like to give to both

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<sup>31</sup> James T. Siegel, *The Rope of God*.

<sup>32</sup> Leela Dube, *Matriliney and Islam*, p. 6-7.

sexes more privacy in dealing with their own issues. Moreover, inspired by Islam, the mother's position is glorified within the Acehnese society. Some literary works dedicated to praise the love and devotion of mother. The word "*po ma*", the classical word for mother, is found in some local Acehnese *syair*, mostly dedicated to remind the children to the roles of their mothers. The word also implants the values of respect to mother before other people in the family and it could contribute to strengthen the values of matrifocality. The strong attachment of children to their mothers still is apparent although those children have grown up. Even some university students who left their village for study will always have a full of longing for their mother. Some children will make a decision for their life, including in their marriage life, based on mother's opinion or consent.

Since early 2000, the campaign for the introduction of *shari'a* law in Aceh has been started, and it was formally launched in 2002 through the celebration of Islamic New Year in the great mosque of Baiturrahman in Banda Aceh. Since then, several bylaws or *qanun* of *shari'a* were issued. The formalisation of *shari'a* law has introduced the injunctions for all of [Muslim] women to cover their head with the so-called *jilbab*. This model of *jilbab* is different from the *nigab* and *chaddor* that cover almost the whole part of women's bodies, including their face, mostly with black or dark blue colour. With their *jilbab*, women in Aceh however still appear in colourful and 'fashionable' dress, particularly during wedding or other *adat* celebration ceremonies. At least, their dresses do not limit their mobility as there are no physical segregations in Aceh community. Nevertheless, this principle is also criticized as it limited the choice of women whether to veil or not to veil. The ways that the rules are imposed in some case also resemble violation towards women's rights, as they are more as an enforcement rather than persuasion.

In addition to the laws on gambling and consuming alcohol, the other form of *shari'a* by laws which to some extent implies limitation of social relationship between men and women is the laws of adultery. It is to included woman is not allowed to be in a quiet place with *non-mahram* with a man outside her immediate relatives. In some interpretations, this also limits the mobility of women to go outside during the night. Nevertheless, this is not commonly adopted, as in many areas in Aceh,

women still go outside their houses for different necessities at night. Another example of how Islam and women issue contested is in the current case of women camat (head of sub-district). In September 2010, the head of one of District council in Aceh proclaimed that “based on Islamic *shari’a* law women unfit to rule.” In this case he endorsed the head of Bireun district to replace the position of womn as the head of sub-district Plimbang. All in all, the introduction of *shari’a* law does affect the social life of women, but it does not affect the matrifocal values of the community, although matrifocal values are not the tradition associated with the Islamic principles. “[T]he expression of Islam is not uniform in the different countries of its following, and as it has manifested itself in many areas it is found to be quite different from that of countries where it first spread and developed. Islam had to accommodate to some extent at least the beliefs, customs, and traditions of the people who embraced it”<sup>33</sup>, therefore “Islam, then is not monolithic in its impact on women’s lives since their gender identity and agency are not constructed by religious values themselves, but also contestation of several values of nationalism, politics, class and ethnicity.”<sup>34</sup>

In the case of Aceh, the position given to *adat* as a non-contradictory entity to the Islamic values pervaded ways of some local practices absorption led to the accommodation of the two incompatible systems. As long as *adat* still attained considerably position in the social life of the Acehnese community, it will preserve the local wisdom and local practice. Even within the formalisation of *shari’a* law in Aceh, the roles of *adat* are still critical and functional. In several cases of *shari’a* law offences, *adat* was used as an approach to solve the problem instead of implementing the punishment as outlined in the bylaws. The head of *shari’a* agency in Aceh has mentioned “*pelanggar syari’at boleh dikenakan sanksi adat*” (*adat* punishment could be applied for *shari’a* law offences).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Therese Saliba, “Introduction” in Saliba . (eds.), *Gender, Politics and Islam* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> see *Serambi Indonesia*, Tuesday, November 9, 2010, “*pelanggar syari’at boleh dikenakan sanksi adat*”.

### C. State Policies and Modernity: Matrifocality in Transition

The New Order regime introduced a homogenous gender ideology imposed upon all areas and ethnics in Indonesia. This state gender ideology disregarded the existing local gender practice in the archipelago.<sup>36</sup> The policy of state *ibuisim* has been applied from high national bureaucracy down to the villages or rural levels.<sup>37</sup> This policy has limited and changed some matrifocal values of the Aceh society. Women that are perceived as independent and active in economics productivity are now supposed to be someone who are dependent and supporters of their husband's public works. For the civil servant, their supports were manifested in the wives organisations of Program Kesejahteraan Keluarga (women welfare movement), and Dharma Wanita or Dharma Pertiwi for police and military institutions. Indeed this state gender policy destroyed women's political independence as their positions are ranked according to their husband positions, not their own personal capabilities.

Aceh community also has transformed from a community of an [Islamic] kingdom to a colonial occupied territory, and to a part of Indonesian republic that adopted *negara bangsa* (nation-state) system. The shift did not only affect the socio-political life of the community, but also the cultural ones. The changes of community structure from a traditional agricultural society to an "in-transition" or even modern community also influence to the life of men and women in Aceh, and their gender relation. The emergence of professional workforce also affects the polarisation of men and women's works. Within a traditional-agricultural society, both men and women shared responsibilities for land cultivation. Within a modern workforce, when a husband get employed in the office and more professional workforces dominated by men, wives cannot share their responsibilities as used to be within traditional agricultural society. The term *po rumah*, that has an original meaning of "one who owns the house", has now been understood among some current generation as "someone who stay at home", and close to the meaning of "*ibu rumah*

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<sup>36</sup> Kathryn Robinson, "Gender Orders in Some Societies of the Indonesian Archipelago", *KULTUR (The Indonesian Journal for Muslim Culture)*, Vol. 2. No. 2, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> Julia I. Suryakusuma, "The State and Sexuality in New Order Indonesia", in Laurie J. Sears (ed.), *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 92–119.



*tangga*".

As the state imposed men as the breadwinner of the family, the marriage law act of 1974 based on Islamic jurisprudence also affirms the position of husband as head of the household (*kepala keluarga*) who bear the responsibility for economic maintenance of the family. This is contradictory to the existing traditional practice of Aceh community in which the parents of a bride who supported the new couple until they are relatively independent economically. The term "*perempuan kepala keluarga*" (female headed household) which is increasingly popular in the Indonesian context, and understood as a woman or a wife who took over her husband's responsibility as a head of household as well as a breadwinner of the family. This situation is only 'tolerable' or recognized if the husband is away or pass away, whereas matrifocal leadership of the household will give women the power in the household with or without the presence of men. The state also imposed some regulations affected the ownership of the land. The rules that all of lands have to be formally recorded in certificates have been transformed the ownership of the land to the husband's name as head of the household. Women unpaid labor is also not recognized formally; in 1980s, it had been quite frequently to see the identity card of women [in Aceh] with "*ikut suami*" for their occupation detail, although she also had her own business and worked in the [informal] agricultural sector.

In her work on gender in Aceh Siapno blamed urbanisation and modernization that reduce women's relative power .

The process of urbanization and modernization has created fundamental changes in women's conception of time, work and rituals. Contrary to assumption that modernization is improving women's lives, I argue that in Aceh, the culture of patriarchy and sex segregation and discrimination is most intense in the cities, the centre of supposed "modern living"<sup>38</sup>

Siapno's claim that urban has more intensive sex segregation or discriminations still has to be proved. It is indeed not a matter of rural or urban setting, but more related to class or social status. The state imposed gender relation has affected the middle and upper class more

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<sup>38</sup> Jacqueline Aquino Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and The State in Aceh: The Paradox of Power, Co-optation and Resistance* (USA and Canada: Routledge Curzon, 2002), p. 108.

than the lower class of the community. The State gender ideology derived from Javanese values of the court (*kraton*) or *priyayi*, in which “*lady*ness” is reinforced and refinement is much emphasized.<sup>39</sup> In general, seemingly, the matrifocality of the local tradition among some ethnic in Indonesia has been more empowering compare to the government or state gender policy that sometimes co-opted for the sake of elites.

According to Tanner, Acehnese matrifocality and the less central roles of husband or father in the household linked to the dwelling and the economic factors as women used to stay in the village and manage the economics of the household“

Children observe that it is their mother who feed them, instruct them, and indulge them. They see their mothers as responsible and important figures that work hard, are respected in the village at large, and take care of most family affairs. Mother’s kinfolk are nearby; but father’s relatives are farther away”<sup>40</sup>

When the dwelling system changed due to the modernity, this also affected the matrifocality practices. The emergence of nuclear Western model family and the growing market development dissolve some matrilineal bonds.<sup>41</sup> The function of *meunasah* as merely men public space no longer exist, this has been a normal place for prayer for both men and women. No boys spend their night in the *meunasah* anymore as all of them have their own rooms in their house. The nuclear family system has also changed the relation between father and children. The dominant roles of mother and her maternal family in the children have also declined.

In current modern workforce, children in Aceh used to live separately from their parent for the sake of their employment, even when they got married, a daughter will not live with her parent as used to be, but live with her nuclear family instead. The power and authority of women’s parents for the new family decreased or even disappear, and more patriarchal family household emerge. However, for the daughters

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<sup>39</sup> Ward Keeler, “Speaking of Gender in Java” in Atkinson, Jane Moning and Shelly Errington (eds), *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Nancy Tanner, “Matrifocality in Indonesia”, p. 139.

<sup>41</sup> Govindan Unny, *Kinship Systems in South*, p. 55.

whose husband also work in the same village, they will stay with their parents, at least until the first child is born. For a daughter who married to someone who has to work outside their village, she will follow her husband, instead of staying home while a husband *meurantau* as Siegel described in his fieldwork in Pidie. The professional works have ensured people with stable life and will allow their family to stay with them while *meurantau*. With more opportunities for women to have formal education, in which they have also to go out for their own house for the sake of education, the opportunities to marry someone from outside her village is becoming greater, and the tradition of same clan marriage also reduced. The earlier ethnographical record of Aceh society showed the preference of cousin to cousin marriage, which is no longer commonly practiced. The extended marriage pattern also makes the earlier matrifocal tradition difficult to be preserved. Interestingly, amidst some changes, still the principle that house belong to women exists in new ways. Although a married daughter does not live any more with her parents for parents who came from well to do family will prepare or buy a house for their daughter upon her marriage. The house is not necessarily close to the parent's house or in the same compound of village like in traditional Acehnese community. Nevertheless, the house still belongs to the daughter and is not part of *harta bersama* (shared asset) with her husband.

#### D. Conclusion

Aceh has been a well-known matrifocal community in Indonesia, although it has a strong adherence to Islam which has been understood to prefer the paternal social system. The matrifocality and Islam in Aceh live side by side. The absorption of matrifocality has been made possible through the place reserve for the roles of *adat*. As long as *adat* and Islam perceived as *zāt ngeun sifent* (inseparable), the practice of local adat such as matrifocality will not be challenged although some principles of matrifocal practices are not “parallel” with the Islamic values. Until currently, Islam does not interfere and change the Acehnese matrifocality. If this tradition is in transition at present, it is due to the state patriarchal ideology and the penetration of nuclear family models followed by

modernity. As long as *adat* is considered as inseparable to the religious life of the community, the tradition like matrilocality will survive, although it transforms into different form or “new” model of matrilocality.

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